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# Speech at International Franchise Association Prayer Breakfast

C. William Pollard

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**International Franchise Association Prayer Breakfast  
Orlando FL**

**February 10, 2002**

**C. William Pollard, Chairman  
The ServiceMaster Company**

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Dickens once said: “It is the best of times and the worst of times.” Although he wrote this years ago about the struggle between two cities, one in England and the other in France, he may well have written about the world we live in today.

We have been reminded during the last six months that life is uncertain. September 11 was not just another Tuesday morning. It was a defining moment. An important reminder to all of us, especially those of us who are American, that there are certain people groups in this world that hate what we stand for, and who will kill themselves and thousands of others as part of what they call a holy war.

People are edgy. Nobody is sure what is coming next. There is a feeling of being out of control. Even before September 11, those of us in business recognized that our economy had moved into a recession. Although recent economic indicators suggest the recession is now over, for some of us it doesn't quite feel that way. Capital spending is still down and consumer spending is far from being robust.

The events surrounding Enron and some recent surprise bankruptcy filings by large public companies have shattered the public's confidence in corporate

America. Several weeks ago, a Time magazine article suggested that people feel like they are “on their own” with little or no confidence in business leadership and what is being reported in the financial statements as a profit and loss or assets and liabilities. How does one explain the action of a Board of Directors that suspends a code of ethics or how are we to understand what makes up “generally accepted accounting principles” when they allow for special purpose entities which conceal billions of dollars of real liabilities?

We live in a world of rapid change and growing choices and, yes, some confusion. How do we get back to some state of normalized living and have some control over our lives? What is life all about? What does it add up to? Is there purpose and meaning in what we are doing? Does it involve something more than just making money?

As I ask these questions, I am reminded of a talk that C. S. Lewis, a noted Oxford don, gave to the students who arrived at Oxford University in the fall of 1939. The title of his talk was “Living and Learning in a Time of War.”

As we think back to that period of history, it was also a time of great uncertainty. Germany was on the move. Poland had been invaded and conquered in a few weeks time. War had been declared by both France and England against Germany. The odds seemed to be stacked against these two countries. They were not prepared for war and America had stated that it would stay out of the war. Germany’s military strength was growing and the blitzkrieg was a reality.

In such a world, why were these students coming to learn the classics at Oxford? What did Plato, Aristotle or Shakespeare have to do with current events? As he posed these questions, he reminded the students that war really didn’t change anything. All it did, he said, was to **aggravate reality**. The reality that

there is a lot about life that was not in their control. No one really knows when they will die, what calamity may be ahead of them in their personal lives or in their business lives. Life at best is always uncertain. But Lewis also pointed out to the students that there were some things that were within their control. The daily choices of life. The daily choices they had to go about the business of learning – to bloom where they were planted. There was no need to be paralyzed into inaction or reaction.

As Lewis concluded his talk, he paused for a moment and then emphasized to the students that as they faced the reality of uncertainty and realized all of what was not in their control, they also should take some time to reflect upon Who is in control and what was their relationship to Him.

As we come here this morning for a time of prayer, we are doing just that. Most of us come from the business world. We have businesses to conduct in these uncertain times and we have choices that we must make day by day. But this morning we have come to reflect upon the One Who is in control. Our gathering today for prayer is a statement that there is a God. A God who wants us to pray to Him. But some may say do prayer and business mix? What does God have to do with running a business?

Recently the Wall Street Journal had a feature article describing how business people were searching for God again. The author noted that a growing number of people in the workplace were seeking a deeper meaning in life, but were embarrassed to talk about church or religion at work.

In March of last year, USA Today had a cover story on the subject of God and technology. The author interviewed nine CEOs of high tech companies and concluded that all of them had spent a lot of time thinking about the big question

of God and most of them had a strong belief in God. As they kept pushing science and technology to its known limits, they were often left with a sense of wonder about the order and organization of the universe and the Creator behind it all.

Last summer, Fortune Magazine had a feature article on God and business. The author concluded that bringing spirituality into the workplace may violate the old idea that faith and fortune don't mix, but yet he also found that there seemed to be a groundswell of doing it. In response to the question of why one would look for God in their work, the answer he received from one of the business leaders interviewed was: "Since most of us spend so much time working, it would be a shame if we couldn't find God there."

Robert Fogel, an economics professor from the University of Chicago and a 1993 Nobel Prize winner, agrees. In his recent book *The Fourth Great Awakening*, he traces the history of religious faith in America from pre-Revolutionary War times to the present. As he analyzed the effect of religion and moral values upon issues in our society and in our economy, he concluded that the biggest issue today in the United States culture was not a lack of employment opportunities or the distribution of economic resources. Nor was it a lack of diversity or economic opportunity. There was, instead, a lack of what he referred to as a distribution of spiritual resources and spiritual assets. There is, he concluded, a void in our society in the development of the character and spiritual dimension of people.

The current interest in spirituality in business shouldn't be a surprise to any of us. After all, business is about people, our customers are people and it's people who work and make it happen. As part of being human, people not only have a physical and a rational dimension, but also a moral and a spiritual dimension. It is the spiritual side of our humanity that influences our character, our ability to

determine right or wrong, to recognize good and evil, to make moral judgments, to love or to hate, and to develop a philosophy of life – a world view if you will that can provide stability and direction even in uncertain times.

So, if it is the whole person that is coming to work every day and that person will be spending most of their waking hours in the work environment, shouldn't we be able to talk about God in business?

Now as I ask these questions, I do so not as a philosopher, educator, political or religious leader, but simply as a business person who, for the past 25 years, has participated in the leadership of a growing and dynamic company that we call ServiceMaster. A company that over this period has achieved an annual compounded return for its shareholders of 20% and is now serving 12 million residential and commercial customers with one or more of our services located here in the United States and in 44 foreign countries. We employ more than 50,000 people and teach and train many more as part of our extended franchise network involving more than 5,000 franchisees.

As a business firm, we want to excel at generating profits and creating value for our customers and our shareholders. If we don't want to play by these rules, we don't belong in the ballgame. But as a business firm we also are seeking to be a community of people that works together to help shape human character and moral behavior. An open community where the question of a person's spiritual development, the existence of God and how one relates his or her faith to their work are issues of discussion, debate and yes, even learning and understanding. The people of our firm are the soul of the firm.

The objectives of our Company are simply stated: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. Those

first two objectives are end goals; the second two are means goals. As we seek to implement these objectives in the operation of our business, they provide for us a reference point for seeking to do that which is right and avoiding that which is wrong. They remind us that every person, regardless of faith, choice, label, gender or race has been created in God's image with dignity and worth and their own fingerprint of potential. Their work and service to others can become part of a positive process of who they are becoming. The development of their character is an integral part of our business of business.

We do not use our first objective as a basis for exclusion. It is, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity, as we recognize that different people are all part of God's mix. It does not mean that everything will be done right. We experience our share of mistakes. But because of a stated standard and a reason for that standard, we cannot hide our mistakes. They are typically flushed out into the open for correction and, in some cases, forgiveness.

It is important for a leader in our Company to know his or her own philosophy of life or belief system and to know how that belief will relate to the care and development of people.

Now, for me as a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, it has meant that as I seek to share and live my faith, I try to do so in a way that does not impose it upon my colleagues and fellow workers, but instead allows the example of my life and leadership to be examined, tested, understood and, in some cases, applied by them as they seek not only to do things right, but also to do the right things.

I believe that as I come here this morning to pray, I am praying to a personal God – a God Who is in control – a God Who loves and cares for me and for this world and has provided a hope that can sustain me through the

uncertainties of life. For me, that hope is found in the offer and promise of Jesus Christ that all who will turn from their own way and follow Him will be accepted and secure in God's love.

This offer of God to be involved in our lives is available to all, but like any offer it cannot be a completed transaction in the life of an individual unless there is a corresponding choice of acceptance and trust by that individual. When that choice is made, there is hope not only for this life but for an eternal life.

Again, it was C. S. Lewis who reminded us that "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals who we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit."

In a pluralistic society and a world where there is freedom to choose, not everyone will agree with my starting point or the need for personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ, God's son. But, for me, this is where I get my direction, my anchor in the wind and storms of an uncertain life.

Now as I look back to my life of running hard and growing and developing a business, loving and supporting a wife for over 40 years, caring for 4 children and now 12 grandchildren, I realize that my life has not been a simple, logical, predictable sequence of events. God has, in fact, chosen many different people and circumstances to break, mold and develop me. The most exciting thing about the process is that it is continuing.

There haven't been answers to every question. In fact, in this growing relationship with God, there will always be some unknowns, but as I continue to choose for Him, my faith grows. One of my prayers this morning is that as each



of you come to pray, you also may find and experience an enriching relationship with God.

There were many tragic and heroic events on that fateful day of September 11. One such event involved a young man, Todd Beamer, as he prayed and then acted to lead his fellow passengers to stop the terrorists on Flight 93 from reaching their target of destroying the White House. This was not just an act of heroism but a reminder to all of us that as we pray and then act things happen.

Six weeks after September 11, I had the privilege of having dinner with the President at the White House. As we shared together the challenges of leading during these turbulent times, we were both reminded of the prayer and actions of this young man that changed what could have been another tragic event of history.

I hope that each of us may learn from the example of this young man and value the importance and power of prayer and the responsibility to act in a way consistent with our prayers.

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